



# Mourning Dove



Photo courtesy of John Maxwell

## Life History

Mourning doves are sleek, streamlined, medium sized migratory birds, ranging in length from 11 to 13 inches. They have a wingspan of 17 to 19 inches and weigh just over 4 ounces. Their estimated fall population is approximately 500 million in the United States and range from Alaska to most parts of South America. Both male and female are similar in appearance. They are grayish-brown on their backs and have buff colored undersides. They have black spots behind their eyes as well as on their wings and the outer edge of their tail feathers are white tipped. Juveniles will have buff colored tips on the primary feathers, giving them a scaly appearance that will persist until their first molt. After 3 months of age juveniles are difficult to distinguish from the adults. The call of the dove is a mournful, soft, slow cooing sound.

Courtship activities begin in late winter (late February/early March) with egg laying beginning in late April/early May. Nests are constructed of loosely fit twigs and grass 5 to 15 feet high in trees and shrubs. Trees with fairly large horizontal limbs are preferred, as well as conifers. These large, horizontal limbs act as a level support for the flimsy nest. Normal clutch size is two. The eggs are pure white with very little gloss. Doves will attempt 2 to 5 nestings in a year resulting in fledgings as late as early September. They have the longest breeding period of any North American bird. Incubation lasts about 14 days and both the male and female take part. The male usually sits on the nest during the day while the female takes her turn at night. The nest is rarely left unattended. Young doves (called squabs) are fed a diet of “pigeon milk” for approximately 3 days. Seeds then gradually replace the “pigeon milk”. “Pigeon milk” is a high protein substance secreted by the crop lining of both the male and female. After 14 days the young will leave the nest, eventually surviving on their own 5 to 9 days later. Soon after the young have left the nest, the parents will begin a new nesting cycle. Within 2 to 3 weeks of fledging most of the young will have left the nest area completely.

The lifespan of a dove is relatively short, whereby, on average, they live just longer than a year. The two to five nestings per year are necessary to maintain the population levels. Predators, disease, hunting, accidents and weather extremes all take their toll on adult and young doves. Average mortality rates can be as high as 60% for adults and 70% for juveniles.

### Nesting Cover

Mourning doves are mostly associated with agricultural habitats but are extremely adaptable to a host of different habitat types. They are normally attracted to open areas where they nest along pastures, field edges and clearings. Nesting almost never occurs in densely wooded areas. Nests are commonly built in shrubs, conifers and deciduous trees. In the absence of trees, dove will nest on the ground, on building ledges and even on chimneys. They will also use previously constructed nests that other birds or animals have constructed. Nesting sites need to be selected to provide protection from the elements as well as predators. Mourning dove nests are a poorly constructed configuration of twigs and grasses, or like materials, found in the nest sight vicinity. The male and female both assist in the construction of the nest. The male will select the material for the nest and then deliver it to the female who builds the nest. When constructed, nests appear to be no more than a loosely formed platform. This, along with the extreme white color of the eggs, makes them easy targets for predators.



Photo courtesy of John Maxwell

## Food and Water

Doves do not scratch or dig for food. They are strictly sight feeders. They eat what is visible and accessible on sparsely covered ground, preferring bare ground. Weed seeds and waste grain comprise approximately 99% of a dove's diet. Preferred weed seeds consist of foxtail, ragweed, pigweed and various grass seeds. Preferred waste grains consist of corn, sorghum, millet, wheat and sunflowers (oil type). Grit (sand or gravel) is needed to grind the seeds that are consumed. Doves ingest small pieces of grit and store it in their gizzard for this function.

Fresh surface water is a daily requirement. The most natural sources are streams, ponds and puddles. Access to water sources is chosen to be as free from vegetation as possible. This allows the dove to water freely with little worry of being attacked by predators.

## Roosting cover

Different types of habitat provide cover for roosting. Coniferous and deciduous trees, brushy thickets, dead snags, and power-line rights-of-way all contribute in providing necessary roosting cover. Hedgerows and tree/shrub corridors in agricultural areas provide excellent roosting sites for mourning doves as well. Roosting sites near feeding areas are the most popular locations.



Photo courtesy of USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service

## Management practices

Mourning doves are managed as a game species in approximately 37 of the lower 48 states. Some beneficial management practices would be the establishment of food plots, leaving small un-harvested areas in crop fields, leaving grain fields untilled after fall harvest and establishing plantings along field edges, fence rows or other idle areas. If idle ground is available, food plots can be planted to provide doves with agricultural food sources as well as an annual weed seed source.

Establishing field borders is a simple process. A strip of ground 10' or wider along the edge of a field will eventually provide annual grasses and weeds. These grasses and weeds provide a bountiful food source for mourning doves. Periodic strip disking will deter woody encroachment and provide the more open ground feeding opportunities they prefer.

Post-harvest grain fields left untilled, as well as small areas of un-harvested grain crops provide doves with numerous feeding opportunities. The un-harvested areas may provide a food source long into the winter months as the grain slowly falls from the plants.

Roosting and nesting cover can be established by creating coniferous, deciduous and shrub plantings along fence rows, field edges and other idle areas.

### **Related *Habitat Management Fact Sheets*:**

Field Border Establishment

Prescribed Burning

Waterhole Development

Tree and Shrub Coverts

Tree and Shrub Corridors

Strip Disking

Riparian Buffers

Grain Food Plots

Strip Mowing

Prepared by the Indiana Department of Natural Resources, Division of Fish and Wildlife. For up-to-date information concerning the Indiana Division of Fish and Wildlife, or for information on the location of your District Wildlife Biologist, visit our website at [www.wildlife.IN.gov](http://www.wildlife.IN.gov)

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